

Praying for the King ***Psalm 72***

What's the good life look like? What would your ideal life look like? Perhaps your first thoughts would be rather self-centred.

- Me having a luxurious home.
- Me having gourmet meals every day.
- Me not having to work.
- Me having exotic holidays.
- Me having servants to wait on me hand-and-foot.

Wealth. Security. Leisure. Pleasure. Peace. Sound idyllic?

But if you could get out of your totally self-centred thinking for a while and think about the question more on the world scale – what's the good life look like? What would your ideal world look like? What problems would you want to get rid of so the world would be a better place, not just for you, but for everyone? There goes the idea of having servants to wait on me hand-and-foot!

In the *Miss Congeniality* movies, Sandra Bullock plays an undercover cop in a beauty pageant. In the pageant, each of the contestants has to answer the question:

What is the one most important thing our society needs?

They all say: world peace. When it comes to Sandra Bullock's turn, she says:

That would be harsher punishment for parole violaters ... and world peace.

Is that all that's necessary? World peace. Certainly that'd make life better for a lot of people – it'd be a great start –

but I suspect our dreams of an ideal world would want to go a bit beyond that.

Psalm 72's about a king. Kings had the opportunity to do things to shape their world. They made decisions that affected lots of other people. Good decisions made the world of those people better. Bad decisions made their world worse.

Psalm 72's not simply *about* a king – it's a prayer *for* a king. The question scholars like to argue about is: Which king? It's got that little title line that says *Of Solomon*. That suggests Solomon wrote it.

- It could be Solomon's prayer for himself as king.
- It could be Solomon's prayer for his son – the next king.

However, when you get down to verse 20, it says:

This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse.

Now, unless you want to treat that as prophecy – that David knew he wasn't going to write any more psalms – then whoever put together book 2 of Psalms has added that statement to conclude his collection. So the question is asked: Did this compiler think David wrote this psalm?

- On the one hand, there are other psalms in book 2 that aren't by David, and so perhaps this one isn't either.
- On the other hand, the Hebrew word translated *of* in that title line *of Solomon*, could also be translated *for* or *about* or *concerning* or *to*.

Ultimately, I don't think it matters a great deal. This psalm's in the collection because it remains an appropriate prayer for any king in the Davidic line. It expresses

Israel's hope for their ideal world under the proper rule of God's king. They had God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:

The LORD declares to you that the LORD Himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for My Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be My son.

Israel looked forward to the fulfilment of God's promise – to a time when David's son would rule in line with God's perfect rule and they'd enjoy God's blessings. They anticipated the Biblical ideal: God's people living in God's place under God's rule. This prayer fits within that framework – to the time when Messiah would come and put things right and rule wisely in line with God's will.

Righteous

The prayer can be divided into six stanzas. The first is in verses 1 to 4:

*Endow the king with Your justice, O God,
the royal son with Your righteousness.
He will judge Your people in righteousness,
Your afflicted ones with justice.
The mountains will bring prosperity to the people,
the hills the fruit of righteousness.
He will defend the afflicted among the people
and save the children of the needy;
he will crush the oppressor.*

When Israel's kings took the throne, they were supposed to write out for themselves a copy of the law. They were

supposed to read that all the days of their lives. Why?

- First, because, above all, the king needed to honour God – and you can't honour God without knowing His word and paying attention to it.
- Secondly, because the king was to learn he wasn't exempt from God's word. He may think that, because he's king, he's better than everyone else and he's an exception to the law. Writing out the law was supposed to teach him otherwise.
- Thirdly, because God's law was the foundation for his rule. It told him what was good and what was right and what was just. It told him the laws he needed to uphold and how to uphold them.

The ideal was a king who'd honour God in his own life and in the way he ruled God's people. That meant promoting justice and righteousness. That's at the heart of this opening part of the prayer.

Did David do that? Many may wish to give him a passing grade, but I suspect Uriah the Hittite – the man David had murdered because he got in the way of David's lust – may have begged to differ. Did Solomon do it? When his son Rehoboam came to take the throne, the people complained how tough Solomon had made life – and the northern tribes deserted his son and formed their own kingdom. Did Rehoboam get it right? During his reign, the people set up idolatrous shrines and false religions and cult prostitution. And so it went on with each of David's descendants. Some were better than others – but none of them could be characterised as totally just and totally righteous.

And so Israel continued to hope for a perfectly righteous king. They wanted a life:

- where wrongs would be put right properly;
- where grievances would be settled honestly;
- where disputes would be handled fairly;
- where complaints would be heard and solved;
- where crimes were punished consistently.

For, where those things happen, it's expected prosperity will flow (verse 3). God's blessings will be experienced as His rule is upheld. It's the expectation outlined in the Mosaic law. Life will become very good.

Israel's kings didn't deliver. It's to be expected really. They themselves are sinful and so use their power for their own ends, rather than God's purposes. And they rule over sinful people – people who want to do their own self-centred thing, rather than God's righteous thing.

But Jesus, David's greater Son, is different.

- He's God's righteous King. And, through His death – where the righteous one dies for the unrighteous – He establishes God's righteous kingdom – the everlasting kingdom where peace and security and prosperity and harmony flow from His righteous rule.
- And He populates that kingdom with righteous people. After all, there's a bit of a problem if you have people incapable of true goodness living in a kingdom that's supposed to be only good – there'll always be a clash going on. And so this kingdom has righteous people – but they're not people who are righteous in themselves (for no one's like that), but people made righteous through the King's death for them and the work of His Spirit in their lives.

If we're Christians – if we're Jesus' people – this is the kingdom we've entered. We already enjoy this kingdom in part now – we acknowledge Jesus as our King and seek

to live under His perfect rule. But we're not yet fully perfected – that awaits Jesus' return. But it will happen.

Eternal

The second stanza's in verses 5 to 7 – although some also include verse 8.

*He will endure as long as the sun,
as long as the moon, through all generations.
He will be like rain falling on a mown field,
like showers watering the earth.
In his days the righteous will flourish;
prosperity will abound till the moon is no more.*

What was the original writer of this psalm thinking?

- Did he expect the sun and moon to disappear in the king's lifetime? Hardly – he speaks of them enduring through all generations.
- Was he just being polite – like the courtiers in Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom who say to him: O king, live forever.
- Did he expect this particular king to do what no king had done before him – namely, to endure as long as the sun?
- Was it a prayer for the Davidic dynasty as a whole – that there would come a time when David's son ruled in true righteousness and he'd give way to a son who did the same and so on through an endless run of Davidic kings?

Your guess is probably as good as anyone else's.

But again, when we come to Jesus, this is exactly what we get – not just a King who can establish God's righteous kingdom, but also a King who'll rule over that kingdom forever. It's not going to be replaced by another sort

of kingdom at some point in the future – a kingdom that's no longer good and just; a kingdom that's characterised by something other than God's perfect will. No, it will continue in its glorious perfection forever.

Death has no hold on Jesus. Death's the penalty for sin – for asserting our independence from God. Jesus never did that – He always lived according to God's will. And so, while He voluntarily died for our sins, death could not hang onto Him. Rather, He rules over death. Thus, He has the ability to give life to His people. And that's what He promises. For those who submit to His rule – who acknowledge Him as their King – He gives eternal life. So, it isn't just a matter of enjoying this perfect kingdom of God for three score years and ten and then passing on into oblivion – it's enjoying it forever. The kingdom itself endures forever and those who belong to the kingdom endure forever.

And so, again, you get descriptions of the goodness of life under this King. As rain falls on the earth, creating the conditions where crops can grow and trees can bear fruit – so the reign of this King will bring freshness and goodness and prosperity to those enjoying His rule.

Universal

The third stanza focuses our attention on the extent of the king's reign. Verse 8:

*He will rule from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth.*

That reminds us of the promise God made Abraham in Genesis 15:18.

*To your descendants I give this land, from the river of
Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates ...*

Under David and Solomon, those boundaries were reached – that era was the high point of Israel's history. But those boundaries weren't maintained by the kings that followed them. For a start, the nation split in two. Then, as the people wandered further from God and further into idolatry, God took more and more land from them. The glorious kingdom under David and Solomon dwindled into insignificance and obscurity.

Yet, the promise wasn't forgotten. Look how the prayer continues in verse 9:

*The desert tribes will bow before him
and his enemies will lick the dust.
The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores
will bring tribute to him;
the kings of Sheba and Seba
will present him gifts.
All kings will bow down to him
and all nations will serve him.*

That's a much bigger area than that promised to Solomon. That uses the places that were at the ends of the earth as far as the people of that time were concerned – thus pushing towards a world-wide kingdom. All nations will serve this king.

In her history, Israel failed to experience this. Rather, instead of Israel becoming powerful and establishing a worldwide kingdom, she becomes subject to the other world powers of those days: Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome. These other powers invaded her, took her treasures, destroyed her cities – even took her away from the land God promised her. It wasn't that God failed. No – the prophets tell us God brought these other nations against Israel. The problem was the people. They aban-

doned God and chased after false gods. So God disciplined them. The Old Testament closes with them back in their land, but firmly under foreign rule.

Then, we're introduced to Jesus. He enters the scene preaching the kingdom. Yet, He tells Pilate, His kingdom isn't like the other kingdoms of this world. And it doesn't come about by military conquest. Indeed, it comes about via His crucifixion – via His apparent destruction. He brings people into His kingdom by dying for them.

- Yet, in this way, His kingdom becomes worldwide. People from every nation on earth enter it – as they willingly submit to the rule of Jesus. After Jesus was raised from the dead, He said to His disciples: *All authority in heaven and on earth is given to Me.* As the gospel is preached to the far corners of the earth, so people respond – so the kingdom grows.
- Still, at present not everyone acknowledges Jesus. Many – even the majority of humanity – refuse to submit to Him. But they will – even though they don't do it willingly. For the time is coming when Jesus will return and all opposition to His rule will be overthrown. All knees will bow to Him. Every tongue will identify Him as Lord. Those who've refused His current amnesty will be imprisoned in judgment. All evil will be removed. Only His perfect and good and just rule will remain. Nothing else.

Compassion

The fourth stanza – verse 12:

*For he will deliver the needy who cry out,
the afflicted who have no one to help.
He will take pity on the weak and the needy*

and save the needy from death.

*He will rescue them from oppression and violence,
for precious is their blood in his sight.*

The observant among you will have noticed I skipped over this theme in the first stanza. That's because I knew it was dealt with more fully here. Yet, it's important to note the psalm doesn't fit neatly into the categories I'm using as the headings for each stanza. Each of those categories is present – and you can certainly argue that some are more dominant in one stanza rather than another – but the reality is most of them are scattered throughout the psalm.

Many people who seek power in this world are quite willing to trample on those they see as being weak.

- Sometimes it's just to use them as stepping stones to achieve their own position of power.
- Sometimes they excuse it as collateral damage for the sake of achieving the greater good.
- Sometimes it's because they're intoxicated with power and like to demonstrate that to others.
- Sometimes they're simply sadistic and enjoy flaunting their power at the expense of others.

Human history's scattered with plenty of examples of those sorts of things. Indeed, if you look in your own heart, you can probably see that you've done the same sorts of things on a smaller scale – and the only reason you haven't done them on a bigger scale is you haven't had the opportunity; you haven't had that sort of power.

God's righteous King doesn't trample on the weak. He doesn't use them for His own political agenda. Rather, He defends them. He upholds their cause. He removes their oppression. He rescues them from injustice. He

treats them as precious. What did Jesus do?

- He healed the sick.
- He released the demon-possessed.
- He touched lepers.
- He welcomed the outcasts of society.

He proclaimed: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

Still today, as people recognise their absolute destitution – their utter spiritual bankruptcy – so in Jesus they find compassion and forgiveness. Jesus didn't come for the self-sufficient or the powerful or the self-righteous – such people don't want to enter anyone else's kingdom. Jesus came to rescue the needy – people who know they're sinners and can only hope for God's mercy. In this King, they're confident of finding it.

Prosperity

The fifth stanza – verse 15:

Long may he live!

May gold from Sheba be given him.

May people ever pray for him

and bless him all day long.

Let grain abound throughout the land;

on the tops of the hills may it sway.

Let its fruit flourish like Lebanon;

let it thrive like the grass of the field.

May his name endure forever;

may it continue as long as the sun.

All nations will be blessed through him,

and they will call him blessed.

It's a picture of prosperity – the good life in the every

sense of the word.

- As this king rules righteously and justly, so peace extends throughout his kingdom and people can concentrate on working their farms and reaping the crops rather than defending them from others.
- As this king rules everywhere, so the benefits of his good reign extend to all peoples.
- As this king rules over the nations of the earth, so the riches of the earth flow to him in gifts and tribute.
- As this king rules in compassion, so people aren't given to complaints and plots – they can spend their time enjoying the benefits of his reign.

As far as Israel was concerned, the golden age was under David and Solomon. Things went downhill from there. There were some other good times when that trend was reversed – like Hezekiah and Josiah. But, for most of their history, this fifth stanza was just a dream. They prayed for it. They looked forward to the time when God would fulfil His promise. But it didn't happen in their lifetimes.

Not until Jesus. In Jesus, God has poured out on us His riches – not necessarily physical riches, but something far more important: spiritual riches.

- In Jesus, we've been blessed not just with some, but with every blessing in the heavenlies.
- In Jesus, we've been given fullness.
- In Jesus, we have an inheritance that can never perish or spoil or fade.
- In Jesus, we've been brought into right relationship with God.

As was promised to Abraham – through his seed, all the

nations will be blessed. This blessing comes to the nations in Jesus.

Praise

The appropriate response comes in the final stanza. Verse 18:

*Praise be to the LORD God, the God of Israel,
who alone does marvelous deeds.
Praise be to His glorious name forever;
may the whole earth be filled with His glory.
Amen and Amen.*

Living between the Ages

The ideal world comes under King Jesus.

- The psalmist looked forward to it. He prayed for it. He longed for the king who'd come from the line of David – the one God would use to bring about His great promises.
- The New Testament tells us this prayer is fulfilled in Jesus. He's God's great King. He brings about God's good and perfect and just kingdom.

No mere earthly ruler could do this. We're all corrupted by our self-centred natures. David didn't achieve it. Not even wise King Solomon managed it. They had potential.

- They had God's promises.
- They had God's law.
- They belonged to God's people.
- Solomon was even given wisdom.

But the inner corruption of their sinful natures still won through. During their reigns, there was still injustice, a lack of compassion, oppression, idolatry, death.

Jesus is more than a mere man. He's God become flesh.

He remains without sin. His rule is righteous. His reign will last forever. He rules in God's universe. He more than fulfils the expectations of this psalm. And, as the gospel of Jesus is taken to all the nations of the world, so the incredible blessings of His kingdom come to people – come to us.

- Sure, we don't see the finality yet. God's promise hasn't reached that stage yet. At present, we still live in a sinful world – a world characterised by wrong thinking and wrong actions and sickness and suffering and sorrow. We ourselves still think wrong things and do wrong things. We still get sick. We suffer in many ways. There's sorrow in our lives. We look forward with great anticipation to when Jesus returns and these things are removed – to when He brings God's kingdom in all its fullness and perfection.
- And in the meantime, we have every spiritual blessing in Jesus. We're already being changed. God's placed His Spirit within us to transform us. We're learning to be content – to trust God in all the circumstances of our lives. We're growing in love and kindness. We're becoming more patient and self-controlled. We're looking more and more like we belong in the kingdom described in this psalm.

In all this we praise God. We thank Him for the King He's sent. We thank Him for the deliverance this King's given us and will give us. We thank Him that He's brought us into this great kingdom and He's changing us so that we truly belong.